

Googling for Sociopaths

One of the best things about capitalism is the way it handles sociopaths. Major executives look up to Alexander the Great and apparently try to follow in his footsteps. But instead of leading a murderous campaign across Asia, they decide to make something people want: newspapers and movies and television shows. True, they're far from perfect, but you have to admit it's a lot better than mass slaughter.

Many books have been written about Google, even though we're all pretty familiar with the company to begin with, but what makes Ken Auletta's *Googled* interesting is that it's a history of the company as told by the incumbent sociopaths. These are the people Auletta has spent his life covering: the media moguls who tried to acquire and conquer their own empires of content and delivery. And to them what's most shocking and galling about Google's incredibly rapid rise is that instead of being engineered by a fellow sociopath, it was largely done by normal, decent people plainly applying the forces of new technology.

"What has Google ever done for the world?" ask the sociopaths at various points throughout the book. "All they do is steal other people's content!" To a normal human the question is ridiculous — it's almost impossible to imagine life without Googling for something, checking your Gmail, or watching videos on YouTube — but sociopaths aren't used to doing things that create value for people. They're just interested in conquering more and taking control. When Disney bought ABC for \$19 billion, it didn't improve most people's lives in any real way, but it did let Michael Eisner regain control of the company he once ran.

So naturally the sociopaths are outraged that their control is being taken away. Newspapers, book publishers, television companies, ad agencies — their businesses are all failing, while Google's is on the rise. The sociopaths may be outraged, but this is exactly what's *supposed* to happen. Most people don't have a vested interest in whether ABC does well or even continues to exist. What they want are good television shows at a reasonable price, and if they can get those from Apple and Google instead of their local cable company, then bully for Apple and Google.

The thing that's hard for the sociopaths to get their head around is that this isn't because one of their rivals has outsmarted them — it's just the march of technology. When the only way to get most television shows to people's houses was over a wire or across airwaves that could only hold so many channels, their particular distribution model made sense. But when the same connection — whether cable, DSL, satellite, or WiFi — can let people download whatever video program they choose, an entirely new model can take hold. The shift isn't Google's fault any more than America should be blamed for breaking off from Pangea.

As a result, the closest people to moguls behind the recent shifts in media distribution are two computer science grad students: Larry and Sergey. These guys don't even have the decency to behave like real moguls — they wear t-shirts and sneakers, get bored during meetings, and like to travel around the world instead of around Manhattan. What's worse, they're constantly talking about "making the world a better place" (by, for example, donating 1% of their profits to charity) and "empowering the user" (by cutting out middlemen and not forcing choices down people's throats). Sociopaths don't talk like that! Who do these people think they are?

Google gets a lot of criticism (often deserved), but it's worth taking a moment to think of all the things they haven't done. If Microsoft had Google's market share in search, is there any doubt that they'd be systematically demoting or even banning their competitors in the search results? Demoting someone in Google is a virtual death sentence, and yet not only has Google never been accused of using this vast power, the idea itself is almost unimaginable.

Hearing things from the sociopaths' perspective, it's easy to get fooled. "Yeah!" you think. "Why should these Google guys get to control everything?" But for average people, this shift has been great: much more stuff is available, faster and freer than ever before, and the people making all the money off of it are actually decent human beings who feel some responsibility for the planet they inhabit. Sure, I don't agree with them on everything and there's a lot more they can do, but let's not lose sight of the basic point: at least they're not sociopaths.

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